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ABSTRACT

Throughout the early years of the twentieth century, literacy education was based on the solid understanding of grammar. Yet as early as 1923, empirical data indicated that the link between knowledge of grammar and correct use of English was tenuous at best. Despite formidable evidence, some educators still advocate the use of grammar as a principal form of English language instruction. Noam Chomsky challenged supporters of traditional grammar instruction by advancing an alternative explanation of language development. Better working concepts of sentence length, clause length, and T-units were developed. Sophisticated studies confirmed the legitimacy of sentence combining as a means of developing composition skills. There were further developments in composition research and theory: (1) student composition should be a natural outgrowth of classroom discussions and the reading of literature; (2) students use 2 different approaches to writing, "extensive" and "reflexive"; (3) "free writing" has utility as a composition tool; (4) journal writing can increase the fluency and self awareness of student writers; and (5) theorists and researchers studied the process of writing as well as the product. Yet an expected improvement in writing proficiency scores in the 1980s failed to materialize as composition teachers continued to emphasize grammar and structure at the expense of developing writing skills. Classroom teachers must be made aware that an extraordinary body of well-documented research has value and can contribute to a better way of teaching writing. There is only one way that students will learn to write and that is by writing. (Eighty references are attached.) (RS)

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Breakthroughs in Composition Instruction Methods without Evidence of Tangible Improvements in Students' Composition: When Will Change Come?

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There is a persistent yearning among many Americans to return to the principles and practices of an alleged simpler time when discipline prevailed within the classroom, academic standards were high, and life in general was better (Bellack, 1969). In many respects such a wistful viewpoint distorts history. Americans tend to have very short memories about their educational history (Cremin, 1974) and this is unfortunate because we cannot hope to progress educationally in terms of composition or anything else if we cannot remember where we have been (Tanner and Tanner, 1980).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when child labor laws were repealed and exploitation of children became less common, education of school-age students was broadened, particularly in the three R's. Furthermore, the Americanization of immigrants and their children in the early decades of this century demanded a special focus on literacy (Cuban, 1984). Emphasis was on making students capable of functioning effectively in the workplace. However, except for a few specialized programs--notably those which were available for the children of the very rich--no emphasis was placed on equipping students with the academic means of improving themselves and advancing within society (Dewey, 1917). That some students were ultimately successful is only minimally attributable to their elementary education (Tanner and Tanner, 1980).

Grammar and Writing

Throughout the early years of this century, literacy education was based on the solid understanding of grammar, which can be variously defined but which is probably generally understood as being the system of word structures and word arrangements of the language (Weaver, 1979). This emphasis was based on the virtually universal agreement that grammar was an essential part of learning how to write (Pooley, 1957).

As early as 1923, empirical data began to indicate that the link between knowledge of grammar and correct use of English was tenuous at best. In that year, William Asker performed a statistical analysis assessing connections between knowledge of formal grammar, capacity to apply sentence structure rules, and composition skill. He found a negligible connection between the knowledge of formal grammar and the ability to write effectively and concluded that the study of grammar was a complete waste of time. Since then a number of studies have substantiated Asker's findings (Frogner, 1939; Butterfield, 1945; DeBoer, 1959; Harris, 1962; Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer, 1963; Sherwin, 1969; McCaig, 1972; Abrahamson, 1977; Petrosky, 1977; Weaver, 1979; Papay, 1983; Hillocks, 1984).

If the issue of the relevance of grammar is reflected upon logically in consideration of both research and experience, then it does not follow that knowledge of grammar will make one a better writer. A person must first have something to say and then must also have sufficient "creativity" or "inspiration" to be able to think of the right words and phrases to be able to express the

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idea appropriately (Rose, 1985). Knowledge and application of language rules (grammar) must logically be no more than a subordinate part of this process.

However, in 1950 and 1951 the Conference on College Composition and Communication in its formulated general policies strongly advocated the teaching of grammar (Pooley, 1957). Others still advocate the continued use of grammar as a principal form of English language instruction (Greenbaum, 1982) or maintain that grammar is minimally important and then concentrate on it anyway (Glazier, 1987). In the face of such formidable evidence one wonders why insistence on the teaching of grammar is so persistent.

Sentence Combining and Writing

Tradition, habit, early training, desire for conventional respectability, and the scholarly ideal of preserving our intellectual and cultural heritage have been advanced as explanations for why teachers continue to use grammar as a basis for composition instruction (Pooley, 1957; Weaver, 1979). There probably is another reason as well. Many composition teachers are not sure what else to teach; a condition certainly in existence prior to 1957 when Noam Chomsky advanced the theory that writers intuitively transform sentences by adding to, deleting from, or rearranging kernel sentences. Practice in the combining of simple expressions into complex sentences was said to refine the use of innate language capacity and to encourage development of increasingly sophisticated ability to use language naturally. Bateman and Zidonis (1964) hypothesized that the study of such a transformational-generative composition method could improve students' abilities to write mature sentences. Their research revealed that it did exactly that although the most startling growth was demonstrated by just a few writers.

In 1965, as part of an extensive study, Kellogg Hunt redefined the terms sentence length and clause length to make them less subjective than the definitions that were then being used in research (LaBrant, 1933; Davis, 1937; Templin, 1957). At that time he also introduced the concept of the minimal terminal unit, or "T-unit," which consists of a main clause and any subordinate clauses or non-clausal structures that are attached to or imbedded in it. The T-unit was thus the shortest possible grammatically complete sentence. Hunt (1965) found that students in later grades produce more clauses per T-unit and fewer T-units per sentence than younger students, thereby reflecting greater "syntactic maturity."

In 1969 in a highly statistical study involving over 200 seventh graders, John Mellon analyzed the effect of transformational sentence combining on development of greater facility of written expression or "syntactic fluency." In doing so he utilized twelve factors of syntactic maturity--seven of which involved T-unit measurements as dependent variables for assessment. He found that students who had studied sentence combining not only showed significant growth but also out-performed the group which had studied grammar on every measurement.

In 1973 in another highly statistical study, Frank O'Hare tested 83 seventh graders to determine the effectiveness of sentence combining in developing sentence maturity, by comparing experimental and control groups on six dependent variables--five of which involved T-unit measurements. He also had representative writing samples analyzed by eight English teachers. The experimental group which had used sentence combining exercises without formal instruction in either traditional or transformational grammar, showed growth on all six factors, while the control group showed none. The quality of the narrative and expository essays from the experimental group was also found to be superior at a significant level when contrasted with that of the control group. Thus, O'Hare revealed that sentence combining practice was what worked in the teaching of writing--not either traditional or transformational grammar. Grammar had been thoroughly debunked as a method of teaching composition.

To review, Noam Chomsky challenged supporters of traditional grammar instruction by advancing an alternative explanation of language development, which was tested and affirmed, at least tentatively, by Bateman and Zidonis. Kellogg Hunt developed better working concepts of sentence length, clause length, and especially of T-units than had been available in composition research prior to his time. John Mellon and Frank O'Hare performed sophisticated studies confirming the legitimacy of sentence combining as a means of developing important composition skills that was vastly superior to traditional training with the use of grammar. It seemed that the best method for teaching writing had been found. From this time forward composition would be taught effectively. The future looked bright indeed.

Other Developments in Composition

Furthermore, other remarkable things were happening in the field of composition research and theory.

First, in two 1968 publications, James Moffett innovatively reconceptualized various types of writing while also indicating that student composition should be a natural outgrowth of classroom discussions and the reading of literature. He maintained that students learn best from peer critiques and advised creation and maintenance of an environment that would permit and encourage just such feedback from student learners to other student learners. He encouraged teacher usage of language games to expand prewriting activities and enhance revision techniques. Thus, Moffett offered concrete examples of how alternative forms of composition instruction could be implemented by classroom teachers.

Second, Janet Emig's (1971) case study analysis found that twelfth graders utilize two clearly different approaches to writing. For most of their academic assignments she found that they engaged in "extensive" writing--a process of contrivance designed to provide what they think their teachers expect while trying to subdue their feelings of cynicism and hostility. But in their often-voluntary, personal writing--as in notes and letters to friends--they engaged in "reflexive" writing--a process which involves more personal care and concern. The reflexive writing was characterized by a vitality that was almost always missing from the students' extensive writing. In evaluating the papers of thousands of British

children, Britton, et al (1975) affirmed Emig's findings by coming to strikingly similar conclusions.

Third, Ken Macrorie (1970) popularized "free writing"--a creative technique which involves spontaneous, unassigned, ungraded writing which deliberately is not initially revised. Peter Elbow (1973) expanded on Macrorie's concept, providing further insights into its utility as a composition tool. Stephen Marcus (1983) indicated how computers could be used for creative variations of free writing.

Fourth, Kirby and Liner (1980) provided the definitive treatment of journal writing, discussing a number of possible variations in its use. Journal writing is an activity which they maintained would increase the fluency and self awareness of student writers.

Fifth, theorists and researchers studied the process of writing as well as the product. Together with John Hayes (1980) and independently as well, Linda Flower (1985) provided special insights into prewriting and preliminary organization of thought. Nancy Sommers (1980) provided insights into the importance of revision by contrasting the differing revision techniques and attitudes of freshman college students and professional writers. Sondra Perl (1979) clarified the processes that unskilled writers use in composing. Donald Graves (1980) provided special insights into how teachers could apply relevant research techniques to their classrooms.

Furthermore, the initial successes of the Bay Area Writing Project in the mid to late 1970s gave birth to the National Writing Project, which quickly grew to include nearly 150 project centers across the country. The writing projects, focusing on inservice education of teachers, became the means of popularizing new theory in research among teachers (Toch, 1982; Nur, 1983; Myers, 1985).

With such extraordinary tools and with so much useful and relevant material available it seemed certain that progress was being made in the teaching of composition and that results of the dawning age of instructional excellence would soon begin to show in writing proficiency scores.

The Persistent Problem

For awhile in the early 1980s the optimism seemed justified (Applebee, Langer, and Mulles, 1986), but in the mid to late 1980s National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) findings showed nationwide writing proficiency scores to be in a state of decline. Furthermore, a review of the scores during the period from 1974 to 1984 indicated that the number of capable writers was actually quite small (Applebee, et al, 1986) and the NAEP Executive Director expressed concern that the improvement in scores during the early 1980s only constituted a return to the writing ability levels that had been attained ten years earlier and, thus, constituted no real progress at all (LaPointe, 1986). This lack of discernible improvement has also come at a time when a study of nearly 20,000 essays of college students from throughout the country was demonstrating an overall grammatical improvement with substantially fewer errors per T-unit than

those produced by comparable students earlier in this century (Connors and Lunsford, 1988).

Why has the expected improvement in writing proficiency scores failed to materialize within a society whose adults seem convinced that their young people lack sufficient mastery of grammar despite powerful evidence to the contrary? Clearly, any answer that is offered to this question must be considered somewhat speculative in the absence of scientific data; yet some attempt must be made to answer the question if the current situation is to be understood, let alone remedied.

Logic provided valuable insight when research findings about the usefulness of grammar in composition instruction failed to correspond with entrenched teacher practices and expectations. Logic indicated that knowledge of grammar was at best no more than a secondary part of the writing process and abundant previously cited research has borne that out. Research has also indicated that every other well-documented method of composition instruction is more effective than the teaching of grammar (Hillocks, 1984, 1986). But does that mean that those other methods are being used and used effectively in classrooms across the country? Young (1988) cites a considerable body of opinion to the contrary (Glatthorn, 1980; Graves, 1980; Toch, 1982; Nur, 1983; Myers, 1985; Martin, 1988). Each of these sources indicates that a disproportionate emphasis on grammar and structure continues to predominate in classrooms where students are supposed to be developing and honing writing skills.

In a related matter, Nelson (1991) also insightfully articulates a compelling argument against the widespread use of norm-referenced testing instruments in the field of composition and in other disciplines as well. Much of the time these devices are not diagnostic or prescriptive but are, instead, used almost exclusively for student identification and classification by skill levels. There is also a resultant differentiation of schools, school systems, and states, frequently for political purposes. Taken to an extreme, some say that fulfillment of political purposes has become a primary function of our system of education (Giroux, 1989, 1988, 1985, 1984; Apple, 1988, 1985, 1983; Dye and Ziegler, 1972; Key, 1963). But teachers do not need to subscribe to highly iconoclastic views; they know from their own experiences how easy it is to become excessively preoccupied with preparing students for artificial measurements in every conceivable area. "Objective assessment" has become paramount within composition classrooms and, unfortunately, that term has become a euphemism for prioritizing consideration of mechanics and minimizing consideration of creativity. Consequently, teachers surrender valuable classroomn time to the preparation of students for tests whose value is at least questionable. That time could be spent practicing composition and providing students with helpful guidance.

There are many areas in which teachers can and should work with students in every aspect of expository, narrative, descriptive, and argumentative writing but they all arise within the context of direction and feedback about student writing itself. It is conceded virtually without exception that students must practice writing if they are to learn how to write (Bridges and Lunsford, 1984).

Research also indicates that students know that they benefit greatly from feedback which is provided to reinforce strengths and refine shortcomings and not within the context of learning a complex set of related but tangential rules (Walsh, 1989).

Somehow it must be communicated to classroom teachers that the extraordinary body of well-documented research has value and can contribute to a better way of teaching than can adherence to a grammar-oriented mode of instruction that by all verifiable criteria has never accomplished its purported purpose. The research of the last two-and-a-half decades has provided teachers with a smorgasbord of possible approaches which can be combined to satisfy almost any teacher's personal comfort zone and the student needs which that particular teacher encounters. As the last few pages have indicated, there are ample methodological means, and the opportunities for the implementation of those means are almost as many and varied as teachers themselves. If teachers are to truly foster their students' creativity then they must be willing to engage their own creativity by daring to let go of familiar old ways that have involved so much effort and such marginal results in favor of methods that have so much documented potential. The research of the last three-quarters of a century makes it clear that students will not learn how to write by studying grammar and rules. Try as they may, teachers will not teach them to by concentrating on such things.

Significant areas that do deserve joint student-teacher attention include: audience awareness and adaptation (Black, 1989; Park, 1986; Roth, 1987), variations of discourse patterns (Flower, 1979; Haswell, 1986; Newkirk, 1984), revision (Bridwell, 1980; Faigley and Witte, 1981); (Sommers, 1980), and cohesiveness (McCully, 1985; Sloan, 1984; Stotsky 1983), to name but a few. However, none of these areas should be reduced to abstract theoretical principles, which always seems to be a danger. Undeniably, the theoretical framework of rules and structure has its place, but educators and learners alike need to be constantly aware that mechanics are but tools to be used in the creative process--and only some of the tools at that. These tools are means to use in facilitating the process of communicating. But these tools are secondary to the creative process itself and the thought processes of the communication itself. Schon (1983) has characterized the process of communicating as personally seeing situations and expressing ourselves within those situations in ways that are, because of our experiences, our learning processes, our insights, and our efforts to cope, quite uniquely our own. This creative ownership of the communication process and not just the mechanics of that process must be the focal point of our educational efforts in the area of composition. Anything less will probably result in a repetition of the trudging methodologies which have confined and which continue to confine composition classrooms--methodologies that focus so much on the details that they obscure and obstruct our abilities to see the richness of finished products and our proper roles in facilitating the creation and development of those finished products. There is only one way that students will learn to write and that is by doing so. By all means provide them with feedback but, as Donald Graves (1978) has said, "Let them write."

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